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1958

Is Manhattan Beyond Hope?

Four Distinguished Planners

Search For Some Answers

Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of New York

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At the 1958 Annual Conference of the American Institute of Planners, sponsored by the New York and New Jersey Chapters, held in October, the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council asked four distinguished planners to exchange ideas on the future of Manhattan.

PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Edmond N. Bacon, Executive Director, City Planning Commission, City of Philadelphia.

Walter H. Blucher, Planning Consultant; Former Executive Director, American Society of Planning Officials.

Albert Mayer, FAIA, Mayer, Whittlesey & Glass, Town and Rural Planning.

Hugh R. Pomeroy, Director, Westchester County Department of Planning.

MODERATOR

James H. Scheuer, Urban Redeveloper; President, Citizens' Housing and Planning Council.

Is Manhattan Beyond Hope?

JAMES H. SCHEUER: Can the planning profession or planning as a discipline hold out any hope for that jungle known as Manhattan? Manhattan's shape and its street grid, laid out many decades ago, have imposed a way of growth and development on our island which seems, in many ways, inconsistent with today's needs. Can planning help us make our city a fit place in which to live, work and do business?

ALBERT MAYER: It has been said that we are being strangled by obsolete streets and obsolete buildings. The fact is that we are daily putting up more obsolete buildings. We're putting such building pressure on Manhattan that we will crush it and make any transit solution impossible. The transit problem is this: we must reorganize the whole area so that the need for transit is brought into bounds.

We've got to follow the practice of the flood-control people. Fifty years ago they built levees along the Mississippi and other rivers. The levees kept getting higher and higher but the floods became worse and worse. We finally discovered that you've got to stop the pressure of water way up in the hills, with small gulley plugging, with stream planting, and so on. Until we make the same kind of decision in Manhattan or in any other big city, we just keep chasing our tails, no matter how efficient an organizational setup there is.

transit — moving people about — is a problem in
Manhattan as in every other city known to the
planners

I would like to say one other thing. Transit itself is being strangled by the principle that everything must pay its own way in a narrow sense. As a result, powerful organizations in our city such as the Port Authority and the Tunnel Authority

all fight shy of anything that isn't going to pay their bondholders interest.

This phenomenon appears not only in New York, but in every city that I have visited in Europe and America. They all keep raising the fares. The number of passengers keeps falling back. The deficit remains or increases. But we're encouraging the use of automobiles because people find it cheaper to have a car pool than to come to work on 25¢ transit. The result is that we're forced to pay in one way by bigger and more multi-level highways what we're refusing to pay in another. The city, in the meantime, is being whipsawed.

HUGH R. POMEROY: The question of whether Manhattan can be rationalized or not is completely idle. Manhattan happens to be a tremendous fact in the economic life of the region, the nation, and indeed the world. Maddening as it may be to get around in Manhattan, frustrating as it is to use a street pattern developed for a bygone day and which no longer fits the circumstances of today, here it is and we must live with it.

I have great hope for the future of Manhattan. But one problem that has to be faced is the transit problem. Most of us planners in the metropolitan area are very much disturbed by the proposal for segmental solution of the transit problem. This problem has to be met in terms of distribution of the major land-use functions in the metropolitan area. We can learn a great deal from what European cities are doing, now that the automobile is beginning to inundate them. They cannot accommodate the automobile in downtown districts, and they provide, or are looking toward provision of adequate transportation to and around the downtown district, with adequate parking facilities, and with the shopping centers kept clear of moving vehicles, that is, open only to pedestrians.

EDMOND N. BACON: I think I can contribute, from Philadelphia's experience. In Philadelphia we have in operation for the first time in this country a commuter railroad backed

by a city contribution toward the cost of the improved service. This is worth studying. I believe that this is a kind of pioneering in which the city of Philadelphia positively recognizes the need for supporting commuter railroads and the apportionment of some of its resources to help solve the transportation problem.

A further thought: I hope some day we'll get to the point where the federal government will recognize the transit problem as it does the housing problem.

MR. POMEROY: I would like to come back to the question: is Manhattan beyond hope? Can effective planning make it a satisfactory place in which to live and work? It could be both. It could be hopeless for one group and a satisfactory place in which to live and work for a considerable number of other people. As a matter of fact, it is apparently a satisfactory place in which to live for some millions of people already, even though some of the planners looking at its problems say that it's a hopeless case, and that as long as present methods and present lack of direction continue it will simply become more hopeless.

transit, planners agree, must be solved on a larger canvas than the city alone — it's a regional matter

MR. BLUCHER: Yes, there are obviously a number of people who find Manhattan satisfactory and others who find it unsatisfactory. But we should go a step further, there are the people who live here during the day, people who come from all the surrounding areas in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut and who live there at night. Are you asking them how they feel about it and how satisfactory Manhattan is for them? And what would make it more satisfactory for them? For the people who commute into the area, it's conceivable that better transit might be the one thing that would make it more satisfactory to them.

I'd like to point out one thing which to me is rather curious. We're spending not millions, but billions of dollars for express routes all over the United States. If you drive the expressways you will note how few automobiles carry more than the driver these days. We used to have an average of one and one-half persons per car, but now it is the rare automobile that transports more than one person. Yet the whole theory of highway building and transit building in the United States seems to be that we're going to solve the transportation problem by building more expressways and more superhighways.

but planners know that the bulk of buildings governs the size of the transit load — you can't solve transit without adequate building controls

Now in order to make sense, as has been suggested here, the capacity of the transit system to carry the load must be related to the buildings, existing or planned, which are served by the transit. If you have a bus system in which the busses move downtown at four miles per hour — that's the speed at which they move in Seattle — then you must limit the height of buildings to two stories or three stories or four stories.

I don't know much about the situation in New York, but it certainly doesn't make sense to keep piling up more and more skyscrapers without building a commensurate transit system.

We look to Europe, we look to Philadelphia, but there is one city on the North American continent which I think is facing this problem realistically, and that's the city of Toronto. There they are building expressways, but they are also building mass transit. There they are building subways, because they recognize that you can't possibly carry all the people that must be carried in private automobiles on superhighways or expressways. Toronto is building a crosstown subway that is going to cost 200 million dollars.

MR. POMEROY: I'd just like to underline one thing that Walter Blucher said, by giving you a striking figure to carry

in your hat. By mass transit, you can transport 40,000 persons on the same amount of roadway that can transport 1,600 persons in private passenger cars. In other words, about 25 times as many.

MR. BACON: In Philadelphia as in many cities, a network of perfectly efficient commuter railroads is having a very hard time surviving. What we have done is conclude an arrangement with the Pennsylvania Railroad to effect a reduction in fare on some of the existing rail commuter lines, together with combination rail-bus fare. The hope is that the increase in number of riders will compensate for the fare reduction.

I believe that this recognition of the railroad's problem and the direct aid by the city government of the rail operation are very important.

MR. BLUCHER: It is perfectly clear that the thirteen municipalities in the Toronto area could never have built the sewers or the transit or the highways or the schools or the water system which is required for that area except on a metropolitan basis.

MR. POMEROY: Is it not true also that the 13 municipalities could not have done so under the metropolitan government either, were it not that the provincial government lent them the money and added a contribution for operating expense?

MR. BLUCHER: The answer to that is, when the suggestion was made that the city of Toronto annex surrounding towns, the municipal board of the province decided that a metropolitan government was a better solution than annexation, and they were prepared to invest in it.

but for many planners the magic has gone from those words "regional matter"—problems aren't solved by simply increasing their size

MR. MAYER: One thing should be pointed out. There's big excitement about metropolitan government, metropolitan problems, metropolitan organization and so on. We could have the best functioning metropolitan administration you ever saw, but unless we first beat out what the objectives are, what we are seeking in our metropolitan area, and how much are we going to spend on highways, and how much are we going to spend on open area for recreation, how much are we going to spend on schools, the fact that we have a more efficient form of government will solve nothing. The better way is to decide what we are going to do first and make up our minds what our objectives are.

Let's not lose sight of the substance of what the metropolitan government is going to do. If we set up a metropolitan government, it might just be as cockeyed as provincial or city governments. We might give it the power to build a big sewer, only to find that it might not be the right sewer. To decide where people want to go, where they want their place of work and their places of entertainment—these are the first things. If Manhattan keeps on building skyscraper after skyscraper, we would still strangle the island no matter how wonderful a metropolitan government we had.

the redistribution of human activities in cities seems to be a vast force with laws of its own—planners wonder how much control they actually exert on the life force of the cities

MR. POMEROY: I want to come back to a point that you made a little while ago. What impresses me is the fact that through the operations of private enterprise, with its wide range of choice and its right to make mistakes (which is, after all, probably the most productive force in a democracy) and with an ever-growing maturity of planning in the area, there is occurring a re-distribution of economic activities throughout the metropolitan area.

Certain functions are recentralizing at the center. Other functions are decentralizing, and locating differentially with respect to the various segments of the metropolitan area. There will be a lot of mistakes made, but there's a lot of sense in what's happening. I agree with you completely that the governmental entity, whatever it may be, must start out with objectives; what kind of a community do the people want? But just how wide a range of choice do we actually have in influencing the form of the metropolitan area. To what extent do you think we can influence basically the form of the metropolitan area and the distribution of its functions?

MR. MAYER: I think there are two answers to the point you raise. One is that, in the first place, we planners don't know a great deal but we know a great deal more than we can do anything about. Ninety percent of planning today is the studying of trends. This is not creative planning at all. One of the faults of planning is that it's over-statisticed. Let's make it creative. We must do more than research, important though it may be. Research to be meaningful must be related to new developments and new goals.

planners question the assumptions of their own profession — what kind of planning is most effective?

Now, even if the planners were as creative and as adventurous as you can imagine, unless the city itself and the region itself get religion, unless they become excited about these subjects, nothing much will happen. So it's a two-fold problem in my opinion.

There's another thing I'd like to say, which is that we must not overlook what I call horse-sense planning. I think when we talk in terms of large-scale planning we're likely to lose sight of the existence — which Philadelphia hasn't done — of the individual street, the individual area. I think one very hopeful thing in this town is the number of windowboxes that are being put up all over town, on the marquees of hotels, in

office buildings, and so on. Now whether we ever get a town in which you can live in any decent way is a totally different question. But in the meantime, this town looks a lot better than it did three, four, five years ago, because of this flower box movement.

I think there are small ways in which you can use this horse-sense planning to improve this town, or any town. For instance, with all the office buildings bellying out to the street, there are only a few where discretion has been exercised whether for the advertising value or other reasons. Why shouldn't the city demand that every office building over a certain area should have its quota of gardens or planting or free space as in Radio City, the Seagram Building and the Chase Bank? You take the new building over on Lexington Avenue — in the 50's. It's a shambles. Why should it be allowed to be a shambles?

MR. BLUCHER: I have one objection and that is that your kind of approach can be used as a substitute for really effective planning. There are plenty of people who would say once you got the flowerpots up on State Street, that's all you have to do.

MR. MAYER: No, once they feel that they need flowerpots, they'll develop some imagination.

MR. BACON: I want to make it perfectly clear that I reject out-of-hand your definition of planning. I think it is totally inaccurate, inadequate, and inappropriate. Planning is not 90% statistics and it is not extrapolation of past trends.

The planning in this country in many cities has taken exactly the aspect which you seem to think it doesn't; that of setting very real and creative and positive pictures of goals and possibilities and alternative objectives. I believe that planning has clearly proved that of itself it can be a very real stimulus for moving toward a different and more exciting kind of city.

Now the second thing I want to mention is that matter of Manhattan streets which was our very first point. I think it's a fact that Manhattan streets are very well conceived for urban living. It is sound that the broad north-south streets carry heavy traffic and relatively narrow east-west streets rowed close together which are entirely different in character —

MR. BLUCHER: The cross streets also carry heavy traffic —

MR. BACON: Yes, but they have a kind of residential character. I think one thing that disturbs me about what I've seen of the proposed projects shown in this exhibition is the new aspect of repeating a single skyscraper form over and over again, in monotonous fashion. Now this is not in the Manhattan tradition. The Manhattan tradition, as I see it, is a very considerable variety of buildings, a very considerable individuality of buildings, a successful interweaving of tall and low buildings. This new phenomenon of the mechanical repetition of very tall skyscrapers of uniform type is much more objectionable in my mind than the mechanical repetition of streets.

we are building without any frame of reference
— urban renewal is being done in a piecemeal
way without planning either where or how

MR. MAYER: What we're doing in most of our communities is fragmental, without any kind of a frame of reference.

MR. SCHEUER: And that is true of a very important factor in the development of our cities — urban renewal. Urban renewal is being carried on in a totally piecemeal and unsatisfactory way. There isn't enough planning of what areas should be redeveloped, what types of structures and occupancy are needed, what to do with the tenants on the site, and what must be done to prevent relocation of these tenants from creating new slums. It's my opinion that urban renewal is as urgently needed in the areas adjacent to the official redevelopment site

and in the other relocation areas as in the city blocks earmarked for renewal.

MR. BLUCHER: Exactly! The point is that in most communities where this is happening, there is no frame of reference. We don't know what we're driving at, we don't know what kind of community we want, we don't know what our standards are, we don't know how much we're willing to spend on schools as against transportation. And until such time as we do have the standards and some kind of a comprehensive plan—I call it a frame of reference—some kind of scheme of what we're trying to achieve, everything will be done piece-meal.

The community must try to decide as nearly as it can what it wants. I think planning can help communities make their decisions, and then we must help to carry them out.

MR. SCHEUER: We've had a free-wheeling discussion, but of course haven't come up with the final answers to Manhattan's problems. I don't think we expected to. What we have done, I think, is to provide a glimpse at some of the questions that city planners consider. We laymen have, I think, become associate, corresponding or temporary members of the planning profession by listening to what these distinguished planners have had to say, and I think that's good. Plato predicted a better world when philosophers become kings; surely we can't really expect better cities, until the citizen himself becomes a planner. Perhaps we've advanced just a step toward that goal in this discussion this afternoon.

CITIZENS' HOUSING AND PLANNING COUNCIL OF NEW YORK

Founded in 1937, the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council is an independent, non-profit civic group, drawing its membership from interested professionals in the fields of planning, architecture, construction, administration, and real estate, and from the general public.

The Council believes in better housing, and a well-planned city. By education, participation in public activities, and counseling with official bodies, it seeks to achieve these goals. In matters affecting New York City, it tries to strike a balance between the legitimate aspirations of local groups and the needs of the city as a whole.

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